DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 464 864 SO 033 806

AUTHOR Byer, John L.
TITLE Approaches for Motivating and Enabling Eighth Graders To Comprehend History Textbooks.
PUB DATE 2002-04-05
NOTE 11p.
PUB TYPE Information Analyses (070)
EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS *Content Area Reading; Grade 8; *History Textbooks; Junior High Schools; *Learning Strategies; Prior Learning; *Reading Comprehension; Social Studies; *United States History
IDENTIFIERS Comprehension Monitoring; *Content Learning; Text Organization

ABSTRACT

This paper suggests a three-step approach for motivating and enabling eighth graders to authentically attempt to comprehend assigned passages from their U.S. history textbooks. The steps are the following: (1) attempt to activate prior knowledge and interest in textual readings by using relevant materials and varied literary sources to motivate students' interest and involvement in trying to carefully read and comprehend their history textbooks; (2) present textual organizing strategies designed specifically to promote comprehension of specific sections of history textbooks and suggest instruction in formulating questions and charts that alert students to the text's main ideas and central concepts as a means of assisting students with overcoming unique reading comprehension difficulties that are posed by history textbooks; and (3) advocate teacher-facilitated class discussion and small group work as a means of monitoring and verifying students' comprehension of main ideas and concepts from their history textbooks. Articles cited from professional journals provide evidence that the teaching approaches advocated may motivate and enable students to comprehend their history textbooks. (BT)

Reproductions supplied by EDRS are the best that can be made
from the original document.

ED 464 864

Running head: Motivating and Enabling History Text Comprehension

Approaches for Motivating and Enabling Eighth Graders' to Comprehend History Textbooks

Submitted for Consideration as an ERIC Document

on 4-5-2002

by Dr. John L. Byer

Assistant Professor of Foundatios and Secondary Education

The University of West Alabama

SO 033 806

BEST COPY AVAILABLE

PERMISSION TO REPRODUCE AND DISSEMINATE THIS MATERIAL HAS BEEN GRANTED BY

J. Byer

TO THE EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)

U.S. DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION
Office of Educational Research and Improvement
EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)

☑ This document has been reproduced as received from the person or organization originating it

☐ Minor changes have been made to improve reproduction quality

• Points of view or opinions stated in this document do not necessarily represent official OERI position or policy

Abstract

This paper suggests a three-step approach for motivating and enabling eighth graders to authentically attempt to comprehend assigned passages from their history textbooks. Step one attempts to activate prior knowledge and interest in textual readings by using relevant materials and varied literary sources is in order to motivate students' interest and involvement in trying to carefully read and comprehend their history textbooks. Step two presents textual organizing strategies designed specifically to promote comprehension of specific sections of history textbooks. Instruction in formulating questions and charts that alert students to the text's main ideas and central concepts is suggested as a means of assisting students with overcomming unique reading comprehension difficulties that are posed by history textbooks. Step three advocates teacher-facilitated class discussion and small group work as a means of monitoring and verifying students' comprehension of main ideas and key concepts from their history textbooks. Books and articles from professional journals that are cited in this paper provide evidence that the teaching aproaches advocated in this article may motivate and enable students to comprehend their history textbooks.

Effective enhancement of students' capabilities to comprehend American history textbooks could greatly increase the educational value of American history courses for middle school students. Since secondary students commonly experience difficulties with comrehending history textbooks that constitute a major source of instruction (Palmer, 1978), approaches assisting comprehension of history texts would greatly benefit the learners. This paper suggests a three-pronged approach for motivating and enabling students to comprehend their history texts that consists of: activating prior knowldege with relevant diverse and interesting materials, promoting history text comprehension with textual organizing approaches, and monitoring textual comprehension with small group work and teacher-facilitated class discussion.

Activating Prior Knowldege With Relevant, Diverse and Interesting Materials

According to Vocke and Hahn (1989), excessive dependence on poorly written social studies textbooks probably contributes heavily to students' overwhelmingly negative attitudes toward social studies. Goodlad (1983), has prodided evidence that juinor high students overwhelmingly perceive social studies to be irrelevant to their present and future needs. Shaughnessy and Haladyna (1985) have supplied empirical findings that provide further evidence that secondary students perceive social studies to be one of the least interesting and most irrelevant subjects.

Since extensive evidence indicates that students' extreme disinterest in social studies may discourage them from even attempting to comprehend history textbooks which constitute a major source of instruction, a fruitful starting point for promoting history text comprehension may be to utilize relevant materials which pique st[illegible] interest in attempting to comprehend their histoiry

textbooks.

Turner (1992) has provided a promising approach for supplying students with easily accessible literacy materaials that are intended to motivate their intrinsic involvement in comprehending textual passages. Interest inventories and questionnaires may be used and the results may be analyzed in order to guide selection of materials and literary sources that appeal to students' authentic interests. Considering students' interests may facilitate effective development of classroom libraries that include practical everyday materials such as: newspapers, magazines, reference books, maps and globes. After establishing classroom libraries, teachers may attractively display a variety of reading materials. Reading materials may provide visual stimuli that piques students' alert curiosity. Audiotapes and videotapes of books may add variety and interest that encourages student involvement in reading (Turner, 1992)

Common availability of videocasette recorders and color televisions in homes means that teachers and students have increased opportunities to record motion pictures which include color and sound. Common availability of cable television means that teachers and students have increased opportunities to record educational programs from a variety of primarily educational broadcasting stations. In addition to recording educationally fruitful programs, teachers may encourage students to record programs that have educational significance. The key is to involve students in the selection of materials which stimulate interest in comprehending history textbooks. Teachers may share general unit plans with their students early in the school year. 1 Having been supplied with general knowledge of topics to be read in the textbook, students may be encouraged to find materials such as motion pictures, newspapers, photographs, family records, diaries and artifacts that add relevance depth and interest to assigned readings in the text.

Varieties of interesting and relevent materials have potential for stimulating students' interest in trying to comprehend their history textbooks. Textual organizing strategies have potential for assisting students' identification and comprehension of major concepts and main points in their history textbooks.

Textual Organizing Approaches

According to Ausubel (1960), learners most effectively comprehend new information which they associate with their more general prior knowledge. Advance organizers preview and organize information to facilitate readers' capabilities to relate prior knowledge to newly encountered textual material. Advance organizers, including charts and semantic maps should begin with general ideas based on abstractions in the text. For example, a major course objective for eighth grade American history is for students to be able to describe how the industrial revolution which began in the North in the 1830s changed the way Americans lived and worked. An initial textual organizing approach could involve students in naming modern conveniences that influence the way in which they live. The teacher could construct a semantic map on the chalkboard based on inventions named by students. This activity could increase the relevance of assigned textual readings by personalizing the importance of the influence of inventions on life and work.

After linking students exixting knowledge and interests to concepts in the text, the social studies teacher may find it useful to make information contained in expository history textbooks more accessible for students. The structured overview is an advance visual organizer that hierarchically places main ideas and subordinant ideas in descending order. With structured

overviews to provide assistance in focusing on the major content, students read the while justifying their addition of terms that describe the major content. Structured overviews direct the readers' attention to important content in a structured and sequenced way..

Having contended that ability to recognize commonly used textual patterns promotes students' comprehension of history texts, Hayes, (1989) wrote that two commonly used textual patterns included enumeration (explanation of main idea with supporting details) and relationships (cause and effect or comparson-contrast). The structured overview may promote students' comprehension of sections of history text that are organized around a main idea and supporting relationships. For sections of history text organized around a cause and effect framework the signal word focus may promote reading comprehension. The signal word focus emphasizes key conjunctions and connecting words including because and since as signals which link actors, actions and the results of action. Encouraging students to recognize signal words that link cause and effect relationships directs their attention to major causes and effects of historical events. After identifying signal words related to cause and effect scenarios, students may read a section of the text while paying attention to the signal workds employed. Students may then summarize the section using the same signal words which connect actors, actions, and results of actions in comrehensible cause and effect scenarios. For instance, section 4 of chapter 13 in a frequently used American history text tells the story of how Eli Whitney's 1793 invention of the cotton gin caused increased prosperity, more cotton growing and more slaves in the South. The section contains a sentence stating that "As the years passed, more and more Southerners planted cotton." The "as" contained in the former sentence is an example of a connecting word that emphasizes cause and effect structure. Students could summarize this section by writing the

following sentences organized around signal words. Since Eli Whitney invented the cotton gin in 1793 seeds could be cheaply and quickly removed from cotton. Before this invention cotton growing in the South was limited because it was expensive and time-consuming to remove seeds from cotton. The South could then make more monedy on cotton growing because of Whitney's invention of the cotton gin. The South started to grow more cotton because it could make more money on cotton growing. Increased cotton growing meant more slaves because slaves were needed to grow cotton.

For history text sections organized around a comparison and contrast framework, charts which visually depict comparisons and contrasts may promote comprehension. For instance, many history texts describe the advantages claimed by the North and the South during the Civil War by using a comparison and contrast framework. Students may be encouraged to develop their own two-column charts in which they summarize the respective situations, advantages, and disadvantages faced by the North and the South during the Civil War.

After providing students with initial instruction in recognizing textual organizing patterns as a means of increasing their comprehension of history texts, the social studies teacher may monitor comprehension of key facts and concepts by using whole class discussion.

Monitoring Comprehension

Palinscar and Brown (1989) have advocated that teachers monitor comprehension by questioning students about central facts and concepts from their assigned readings. Asking questions to the whole class can be a stimulating and thought-provoking activity that piques students' interests while emphasizing the central points that students need to retain. One approach

to questioning the whole class is the use of the "question - wait - call" technique. This technique involves the teacher asking a question and providing at least a few moments of wait time. After sufficient wait time the teacher calls on a student by name to answer the question. Teachers who are just beginning to use the question-wait-call technique may want to have a system for insuring that they ask at least one question to every student. This technique promotes alert interest because every student knows that he or she will get to answer a question. Some oppose the asking of questions directly to one student on the grounds that the student will be embarassed if he or she cannot answer. The teacher can mitigate this problem by providing promts or suggestions which guide students toward correct answers. It a student cannot be guided to a correct answer then the teacher may ask the same student another easier question at a later time.

Questions that monitor comprehension should help students extract net meaning and historical understanding from their readings. Questions may assist students in linking historical events into a framework of historical understanding. For instance, questions should help students understand the relationships between historical events. Questions such as "how did Whitney's invention of the cotton gin lead to the Civil War" make students think about interrelationships. Starting with literal recall, questions should increasingly encourage students to understand historical relationships.

Conclusion

This paper has expored some ideas from the literature and from experience which seem to motivate and enable middle school students to comprehend history texts. While history textbooks present unique difficulties for comprehension these textbooks can be valuable learning instruments

if students are motivated and enabled to extract central concepts and historical understanding from their reading. Pupil involvement is of central importance to promoting both the desire and the capability to comprehend history textbooks.

References

Ausubel, D. (1960). The Use of Advance Organizers in the Learning and Retention of Meaningful Verbal Materials Journal of Educational Psychology, 51, 267-272

Goodlad, J. (1983). A Place Called School: Prospects for the Future. New York: Macmillan.

Hayes, D. (1988). Toward Students Learning through the Social Studies Text The Social Studies, 79(6), 266-269.

Palincscar, A. & Brown, A. (1989). Instruction for Self-Regulated Reading. Toward the Thinking Curriculum, Current Cognitive Research, Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development. Alexandria, Virginia.

Palmer W. (1978) Toward a Realistic Rationale for Teaching Reading in the Secondary School. Journal of Reading, 22(3), 237-239.

Shaughnessy, J. & Haladyna, T., (1985). Research on Student Attitude Toward Social Studies. Social Education, 43, 150-153

Turner, G. (1992), Motivating Reluctant Readers, What Can Educators Do? Reading Improvement, 29(1). 51-55.